

2317

B7

y 1

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE
BULLETIN

VOL. XIII

OCTOBER, 1918

No. 2

Emma Willard's
Life and Work
In Middlebury

PUBLISHED BY THE COLLEGE
SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, DECEMBER, JANUARY,
FEBRUARY, APRIL, AND JULY

*Entered as second class matter at the Postoffice, Middlebury,
Vt., under act of Congress of July 16, 1894*

Monroe

Mrs. Emma Willard's
Life and Work
In Middlebury



PREPARED ORIGINALLY FOR
THE EMMA WILLARD SOCIETY
OF NEW YORK
BY EZRA BRAINERD, LL. D.

Republished by Middlebury College
OCTOBER, 1918

Foreword

LA 2317
W 537



THE GIFT of Mrs. Russell Sage of \$100,000 to Middlebury College came as a complete surprise to many of the friends of that institution. A few months ago the college reprinted Emma Willard's "Plan for Female Education" on the one hundredth anniversary of the issue of the first edition. The publication of the present bulletin will serve as a link to connect Mrs. Sage's interest in the life and work of Emma Willard with her generous gift to the college. In 1893 Dr. Ezra Brainerd, then President of the College, was invited to give an account of the early career of Mrs. Willard before the members of the Emma Willard Society, who met in Mrs. Sage's house; his account aroused much interest and led to a second invitation in the following year. The first fruits of President Brainerd's services appeared May 6, 1895, in a check of \$2000 received from Mary Seymour Eddy, Treasurer of the Emma Willard Society, the fund which established the Emma Willard scholarships at Middlebury. In the meantime his story of Emma Willard's early life was published by a friend and distributed by Mrs. Sage. The present republication of this account has a two-fold timeliness. It furnishes the friends of Middlebury College with the explanation of the interesting way in which Mrs. Sage's friendship for Middlebury began, and it marks the centennial of the departure of Emma Willard from Middlebury to embark on her later, better-known, and eventually more successful educational enterprise in New York. Doctor Brainerd's account is republished unchanged, save for four minor footnotes which have been added for their local interest.



MRS. EMMA WILLARD

Mrs. Emma Willard's Life and Work in Middlebury

BY EZRA BRAINERD, LL. D.

Mrs. Emma Willard is known as the pioneer in the great movement of the nineteenth century for the higher education of woman. To say that she had a genius for teaching, that she devised improved methods, that she wrote admirable textbooks, and that she impressed her own high ideals upon the characters of her pupils is indeed great praise. But it is a still greater glory to have started a movement which has revolutionized the ideas of the civilized world on the subject of woman's education, a movement which has culminated in the founding of grand colleges exclusively for women and in the admission of women to older colleges on equal terms with men. For it is not too much to say that Wellesley and Vassar and their sister institutions on either side the Atlantic are the fair fruitage, in time, of those seminal ideas so ably set forth in Mrs. Willard's *Plan of Female Education*.

It is interesting to study the origin of such a great movement; it is like tracing some noble river upward to its sources in the distant mountains. Let it be our pleasant task to search out, as far as possible, the influences that shaped Mrs. Willard's career as an educator. In so doing we shall find that the formative period of her life was the twelve years spent in Middlebury—a period passed over too cursorily in Dr. Lord's biography. The fresh interest in this truly great woman, awakened by the Emma Willard associations of the country, is an additional reason for considering more in detail the incidents of this portion of her life and for inquiring into the moral forces which called forth her grand ideas regarding the scope of woman's education.

We should, as a preliminary, call to mind briefly the circumstances of her early life in Connecticut, her excellent parentage, the beautiful home life of her childhood, her two years of earnest study under Dr. Wells, her brilliant success as a teacher at the early age of 17. These facts help us to picture the bright, noble-hearted woman who, at the age of 20, came in 1807 to take charge of the female academy at Middlebury.

The influences that shaped her character in her new home were from three sources. Let us speak first of her social surroundings.

The early inhabitants of Middlebury were noted for their enterprise and intelligence. Up to the close of the Revolutionary war the Champlain Valley had been for centuries the arena of savage warfare. But as soon as the cessation of hostilities would permit these fertile lands were rapidly settled by a vigorous and high-minded class of young men and women from the best families of Connecticut. There was in Middlebury an unusually large number of educated men, graduates of Yale and Dartmouth and Brown. Of their interest in religion and taste in architecture they have left a striking monument in the church edifice, that is still standing, with its beautiful groined arches and its graceful steeple, after the Christopher Wren style. Their devotion to the cause of education is evinced by their establishment, before the beginning of the present century, of three distinct institutions of learning—the grammar school, the female academy, and the college. The elder President Dwight, of Yale, who made three visits to the town prior to 1810, has recorded in his books of travels his high appreciation of the character of the people and of their educational work. Mrs. Willard herself, then Miss Emma Hart, has given emphatic testimony to the same effect. In a letter to her parents, written during the first year of her residence, she says:

“I find society in a high state of cultivation, much more than any other place I was ever in. The beaux here are, the greater part of them, men of collegiate education.*****Among the older

ladies there are some whose manners and conversation would dignify duchesses."

If our limits would permit, we might speak in particular of some of these excellent men and women whose society Miss Hart thus enjoyed. It was her privilege to know the Hon. Horatio Seymour, afterwards for twelve years United States Senator, a man who was earnest from the first in the cause of woman's education, and who gave the land on which was erected in 1802 the "Female Academy,"* one of the very first school edifices in the country built especially for women. She knew also the Rev. Dr. Merrill, who, on graduating from Dartmouth in 1801, had won the valedictory over his illustrious classmate Daniel Webster, and who for thirty-seven years was pastor of the Congregational church and a recognized leader throughout the State in matters of education and religion. She knew also Dr. Henry Davis, president of the college, who was eminent for his talents and eloquence and personal address, who was in 1817, on the death of Dr. Dwight, elected president of Yale College, and who reflected no small honor on Middlebury by declining the appointment. With these men and others of scarcely less character, not yet famous, but in the vigor of early manhood, Miss Hart, the young preceptress of the Female Academy, was called to associate. Her letters and journal show how deeply interested she was in her new life. She has an intense relish for agreeable society; she attends parties and balls during the week, and four meetings on Sunday. She drinks deep draughts of the joyous cup of youth and health. But her strong brain never becomes giddy; there is too much of the Puritan seriousness in her veins. She keeps up her studies in history; she writes poetry; she paints; she criticises sermons; and withal conducts a school for young ladies with constantly increasing reputation.

*This institution has been referred to by local historians as the "Female Seminary." It should not be confused with the seminary, which was a later institution, located on the street to which it gave its name.

The building where this school was held is still standing.* It has been unused for years, but is guarded with religious care by its present owner, a son-in-law of Horatio Seymour. The whole of the second story was one large room, warmed only by an open fireplace in the north end. For in those days, as Lowell tells us:

There warn't no stoves (tell comfort died)
To bake ye to a puddin.'

But a fireplace did not always bring comfort to the schoolroom during the severe cold of that Vermont winter. The north wind at times would whistle around the building and penetrate the schoolroom until they could endure the cold no longer. The tact of the schoolmistress was equal to the emergency. She would then (so she writes in a letter to Judge Swift) call her girls to the floor and arrange them two and two in a long row for a contra-dance; and while those who could sing would strike up some stirring tune she, with one of the girls for a partner, would lead down the dance and soon have them all in rapid motion. Afterwards they would return to their school exercises.

But in two years she closed her connection with the female academy. On the 10th day of August, 1809, she was married to Dr. John Willard. And this brings us to the second phase of her Middlebury life, and to consider the influences of this marriage upon her after career.

Dr. Willard was twenty-eight years the senior of his wife, but nowhere in the annals of biography can we find a married life more happy than theirs was from first to last. From several letters we are permitted to see how intimate was the union of heart and soul between the two. As we read them, there arises before us the fair picture of the enthusiastic young wife, studying to make herself less unworthy of the good and wise man who had enthroned

*The building was torn down a few years ago. The location may be still determined by the remains of the cellar, which is near a little, old well-house on the west side of the railroad track, near the marble yard, and not far from the passenger station at Middlebury.

her in his heart. In his absence she delves into the dry books of his medical library, to prepare herself to sympathize with him in his passionate attachment for these old authors. He is delighted to find her kindled into his enthusiasm and able to discuss with him intelligently questions of physiology and medicine. Then at another time she takes up the study of geometry. Dr. Willard has a nephew in college who lives with them—his namesake, afterwards for many years judge of the supreme court in New York. One vacation she takes up his Euclid and reads on, proposition after proposition, fascinated with the study. She thinks she understands it; but the general belief in the incapacity of “the female mind” for mathematics causes misgivings, until she submits herself to her nephew for examination, and he pronounces her learning correct. The same thirst for knowledge afterwards leads her to take up natural philosophy and to study Paley’s Moral Philosophy and Locke’s Essay concerning Human Understanding. Most men in those days (perhaps some in our day) would have discouraged a wife in such ambitious and unfeminine studies. Not so Dr. Willard. His generous heart was pleased with her efforts after intellectual culture, and he was proud of her achievements. There began to dawn upon his mind new views of woman’s mental capacity, and a disposition to take her part against man’s lordly assumption of superiority. It would be a great error to imagine that during the early years of her married life Mrs. Willard was engrossed in intellectual pursuits. These were only her diversions; domestic duties occupied the greater portion of her time. Her son was born in 1810. Dr. Willard was away from home much of the time, and the charge of the household and the farm devolved upon the young wife, who performed these duties with care and prudence. An interesting letter, quoted by Dr. Lord, informs her husband that “the winter apples are gathered; the cider is made (23 barrels); the potatoes are nearly all in; the buckwheat is gathered,” and so on through a long list of homely duties. Surely here was

A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food.

So passed another period in the life of this great woman, a period filled with the happy experiences of wifehood and motherhood. But clouds after a while appeared in their bright sky; God was leading them on to a higher stage in their life work.

Dr. Willard was a man of property and of high social position at the time of his marriage to Miss Hart. He owned several small farms in the vicinity of Middlebury; he had just built an elegant brick house on Main street, now occupied by Mrs. Charles Linsley.* He had been a successful politician; he was chairman of the central committee of the Republican party, was appointed marshal of the District of Vermont by Jefferson in 1801, and was one of the directors of the Vermont State Bank. His financial embarrassment largely grew out of his connection with this bank through a romantic incident that is not generally known. In the summer of 1812 an adroit burglary was committed on the banking house in Middlebury. It was entered by a false key, and a large sum of money was taken without leaving any signs of violence or disorder. Of course the directors very soon discovered the fact of the burglary; but it was not so obvious to the public, and the directors were called upon to account for the missing funds. The legislature was led to adopt harsh measures for their prosecution, and after a trial before the supreme court judgment was rendered against the supposed delinquents for over \$28,000. The greater part of this claim, it is true, was remitted by a subsequent legislature; and in after years the discovery of the false key in the attic of a certain house† fully vindicated the innocence of the di-

*The house mentioned is now owned and occupied by Mrs. Mary Tilden. It stands on South Main Street at the head of Storrs Avenue, not far from the western entrance to Porter Field.

†This house is now owned by the Congregational Society and used as a parsonage. It was at the time of the bank robbery the property of Joshua Henshaw. This man mysteriously disappeared at the opening of the War of 1812 and is reported to have gone to Canada.

rectors. But the records of the town show that the liens of the Vermont State Bank on the real estate of John Willard were removed only after many years.

But the heroism of the devoted wife was equal to the occasion. She would return to the work in which she had achieved such brilliant success before her happy marriage. She would open a boarding school for girls in her own house. The project must have been humiliating to the mind of Dr. Willard. Only a loving confidence in his wife could have secured his consent; but when he gave it he set himself to work with her, heart and soul, to the end.

It should be remembered that when Mrs. Willard first opened her school in 1814 her "plan" was altogether undeveloped. She had none of those ambitious projects for the higher education of woman which afterwards animated her. Her sole object, as she distinctly says, was to assist her husband in his pecuniary affairs. It was while walking lovingly in the pathway of domestic duty that the Lord led her into the wider field of her life's mission. It remains for us then to consider this third stage in her novitiate, the light that came to her through her new experiences in teaching.

Mrs. Willard's home in Middlebury was almost under the shadow of Middlebury College. The college campus was just across the street from her house. She heard from hour to hour through the day the call of the bell to chapel or to recitation. For four years she listened to reports of college life and work from the nephew, who sat at her table while a student. When she opened her new school she taught at first the usual round of light and superficial studies that the age had prescribed for "females." But "my neighborhood to Middlebury College," she writes, "made me bitterly feel the disparity in educational facilities between the sexes." She had already made private excursions into the realms of solid learning, forbidden to her sex, and she was profoundly conscious of woman's capacity to understand all that was highest and best in the reaches of human thought. Why should the sister be de-

prived of the intellectual culture that is offered to the brother? Why will not the companionship of wedded life be purer and stronger if the mental training of the wife is comparable with that of the husband? Why will not the mother give to the world nobler sons and daughters if her own character be strengthened and refined by the highest education? These are hackneyed questions to-day, but they were new to the world when in 1815 they first throbbled in the brain of Mrs. Willard.

Then the further question: could she herself effect this great change for woman? She heard the divine call; should she be disobedient to the heavenly vision? The cause was so just, so humane, so practicable, that surely if she could advocate it before governors and legislators she might effect the desired reform. Still the project seemed presumptuous, so that she hesitated to entertain it; she concealed it for a while even from her husband, though knowing that he sympathized with her in her desires for the better education of woman.

But the absorbing, unborn purpose of her soul she could not long keep from the confidence of her husband. How he received her confidence she shall tell us in her own fervid words: "He entered into the full spirit of my views with a disinterested zeal for that sex, whom, as he believed, his own had injuriously neglected. With an affection more generous and disinterested than ever man before felt, he, in his later life, sought my elevation, indifferent to his own. Possessing on the whole an opinion of me more favorable than any other human being ever will have, and, thus encouraging me to dare much, he yet knew my weaknesses, and fortified me against them."

Mrs. Willard now addresses herself to the task of elaborating "A plan for improving female education." It was the slow work of two or three years. It was written and rewritten seven times; fully three-fourths of the original matter was finally rejected. She was meanwhile testing some of her theories by experiments, so far as her limited resources would permit. She formed a class in



EMMA WILLARD'S HOME IN MIDDLEBURY
(Now Owned by Mrs. Mary L. Tilden.)

moral philosophy, and another in the philosophy of the mind, taking Locke's great work as a textbook. The professors of the college were fearlessly invited to attend her examinations, and to witness the proofs that "the female mind" could appreciate and apprehend the solid studies of the college course. She desired, in turn, to attend the examinations of the young men, to learn how they were conducted, and to see what attainments in scholarship were made in college. It is humiliating to think that this privilege was refused, President Davis considering that it would not be a safe precedent, and that it would be unbecoming in her to attend. But let us not blame too severely this stanch defender of the proprieties; he was simply guarding well-bred society from a terrible nervous shock.

These were the rough ways of the world—till now.

Mrs. Willard was for some time perplexed to find a suitable name for her ideal institution. It would never do to call it a "college", for the proposal to send young ladies to college would strike everyone as an absurdity. She has told us how she finally hit upon a suitable name. "I heard Dr. Merrill pray for 'our seminaries of learning.' I said, I have it—I will call it a female seminary. That word, while it is high as the highest, is also low as the lowest, and will not create a jealousy that we mean to intrude upon the province of the men." And so the word came afterwards into general use to designate the higher grade of schools for girls.

We can not enter into any detailed discussion of the "plan", as it was finally published in 1818. In many respects it is open to criticism, if we judge it by the higher standards of the present. The seventy-five years since passed have seen wonderful changes in our ideas regarding woman's education and woman's work—thanks to the publication of this same treatise. It is of the nature of a plea, and she is evidently cautious about asking too much, for fear she may lose all. Still we must regard it as a wonderful document—the Magna Charta of the rights of woman in matters of education.



It was addressed to a State legislature, for Mrs. Willard rightly judged that the equipment of her ideal institution could not be furnished by private means, and that it could be properly managed and perpetuated only by a legal board of trustees. Those were not the days of large private fortunes and still less of princely donations to institutions of public charity or of general education. Mrs. Willard felt that her only recourse was to secure the State patronage which was at the disposal of patriotic lawmakers. Of the reasons that led her to apply to the legislature of New York, of her grievous disappointment after years of patient effort and waiting, of the brilliant success which she finally achieved, principally through her own great personality, it is foreign to my present purpose to speak. These things are more clearly matters of history than the obscure events of her early life in Middlebury.

Let me simply add in closing that to-day the spirit of her teachings has thoroughly permeated the institutions of the town where her great work originated. The female academy and the boys' grammar school are now things of the past. But in the public high school and in the college the advantages of a liberal education are offered to young men and to young women on equal terms. Thus in God's providence do the wise and good build for those who come after them.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 022 159 055 7